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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationship of Polish to the other languages considered to be within the Slavic group. The comparison is mainly phonological and considers the Proto-Slavic features still preserved in Polish as well as the distinctive features of Polish which have developed from Proto-Slavic. The development of vowels and consonants is discussed on this basis, and remarks are made concerning phenomena in related languages. General conclusions are enumerated, establishing the position of Polish among the other Slavic groups. (VM)

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The Relationship Between Polish and
Other Slavic Languages

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Slavic languages (together with Baltic languages) represent the northeastern part of the eastern (or satem) branch of the Indo-European languages.

It is customary to divide Slavic languages into three large groups, known as West Slavic, East Slavic, and South Slavic. These groups include the following languages:

West Slavic includes Polish, Czech, Slovak, and Lusatian (also known as Sorbian or Wendish);

East Slavic includes Russian, Ukrainian, and White Russian (also known as Byelorussian);

South Slavic includes Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian, Bulgarian, and Macedonian.

Within these groups, it is fairly easy for speakers of one Slavic language to understand speakers of another Slavic language. However, it may be noted that there are basic differences between, for example, Polish and Czech, Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian, and (to a lesser extent) Russian and Ukrainian.

The characteristic features of languages included in each group are a result of the development of certain vowels and consonants from the Proto-Slavic period (first through ninth century A.D.) to the period of the disintegration of Slavic linguistic unity (from the tenth century A.D. onward).

In discussing the relation of Polish to other Slavic languages, we have to consider two things:

One: The Proto-Slavic features still preserved in Polish; and

Two: The distinctive features of Polish which have developed from Proto-Slavic.

Let us first discuss the Proto-Slavic features of the language under consideration.

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There are some characteristic features in Polish that no longer exist in any other Slavic language spoken today. These are:

A) The nasal vowels ę and a.

It is true that the nasal sound of these vowels is often preserved only in spelling, since they are often partly denasalized in Polish, as in zęby /zemby/ "teeth", zęb /zomp/ "tooth." On the other hand, the words mięso "meat" and są "they are" still contain the original ę and a sounds. There still is a phonemic difference between ę and e, as in te ("this one", feminine accusative singular) and te ("these", feminine and neuter nominative and accusative plural).

B) The vowel i (not y) after the velars g and k is also a feature inherited by Polish from Proto-Slavic. Compare Polish długi "long" and ruski "Russian, Ruthenian" with Old Russian (or even nineteenth-century Russian) dolgyj and ruskvyj.

C) The Proto-Slavic clusters dl and tl (which also exist in other Slavic languages and, to some extent, in East Slavic and South Slavic languages) have been well preserved in Polish. Thus we have, in Polish, mydło "soap" (Czech mýdlo) versus mylo in Russian; and the Polish verb form zamiotła "she swept" corresponds to zamelá in Russian. But we also have a well-preserved dl cluster in all the three languages mentioned, as in Polish siodło "saddle," Czech sedlo, and Russian sedló.

Let us now turn to the distinctive features of the Polish language. These are a direct result of development in the Polish vowel and consonant system after the disintegration of Slavic linguistic unity (that is, after the ninth century A.D.).

First of all, we have the change of the vowels ě to a, and e to o, respectively, when followed by the non-palatal (hard) consonants t d s z ʒ ʃ ʒ ʃ. This change most likely took place in Old Polish, and is one of the features that distinguish Polish from other Slavic languages. Compare, for example, Polish las "forest" and żona "wife" with Russian les and žená.

Second, the reduction and replacement of the Proto-Slavic semi-vowels (the so-called front "yers" and back "yers") in Polish was different from that which occurred in the other two Slavic language groups (though similar to what occurred in West Slavic languages). In Polish, the front "yer" in medial position changed to ę (always preceded by a palatal consonant), as in dzień "day," which changed to dzien; the back "yer" changed to a (always preceded by a non-palatal consonant), as in sni, "dream," which changed to sen. In Russian, on the other hand, the front "yer" in medial position also changed to ę (always preceded by a palatal consonant), as in дѣнь (from děne), while the back "yer" in medial position changed to o (always preceded by a non-palatal consonant), as in сон (from so. nъ). In Serbo-Croatian, however, both the front and the back "yer" in medial position were replaced by a (either long or short), as in dān (long) "day" and sān (short) "dream." In Polish declension, moreover, these vowels are often unstable and tend to disappear, as they do also in many other Slavic languages. A good example of this is furnished by the Genitive

(or possessive case) singular of many common nouns:

Polish: dzień/dnia, Slovak: deň/dňa, Russian: děň'/dn'a;

Polish: pies/psa, Slovak: pes/psa, Russian: pēs/psa.

A more typically Polish development is that of the syllabic sonants l and r into al (or el) and ar (or er) (versus ol, or in Russian), for example:

Polish pełna "full," Russian polná; Polish garb "hump," Russian gorb.

But in connection with a palatalized or nonpalatalized consonant, we have a different development: twierdzić "to assert," but twardy "hard" (Russian tverdit' and tverdyj); śmierć "death" but martwy "dead" (Russian smert' and mertvyj). Compare this with the Czech tvrdý and smrt, in which the syllabic sonant r has not vocalized.

Third, the Proto-Slavic vowel-consonant combinations or, ol changed in Polish to lo, ro (versus la, ra in Czech and Serbo-Croatian and olo, oro in Russian and Ukrainian, for example). Thus, we have, in Polish, głowa "head," krowa "cow," in Czech hlava, kráva, in Serbo-Croatian gláva, kráva, and in Russian: golová, koróva.

Fourth, the fixed stress (which in Modern Polish falls on the next-to-the-last syllable, and which did not exist in Proto-Slavic) is a feature shared by Polish with the other West Slavic languages, notably Czech and Slovak (though these two have a fixed stress on the first syllable).

Incidentally, in Modern Polish there is no vowel quantity--the short and long vowels do not exist--which is not at all the case in Czech and Serbo-Croatian, for example (where short and long vowels are still in meaningful, phonemic contrast).

Fifth, in Polish we have close vowels, like the ó (spelled as o with an acute accent mark over it), resulting from compensatory lengthening which in turn was a result of the loss of the final "yer." This change did not occur, for instance, in Russian. Thus, we have: Polish bóg "god" (from Old Polish bōg after the final "yer" was lost) versus Russian bōg and Ukrainian bōh, where we have open vowels in the same word.

Both older and more recent studies have shown that quite a number of old Proto-Slavic consonants have been preserved in Polish. However, we have a certain change in Polish, sometimes called an extension of palatality, namely, in certain positions, p b m t d n s z r before e ě e and front "yer" developed into corresponding palatal sounds p' b' m' t' d' n' s' z' r'. This probably took place in Old Polish. As a subsequent development, the palatalization of these consonants became no longer dependent on whether the vowel following them was e or ě. Thus, we have a contrasting pair of words: bez/bes "lilac" and bies/bēs "demon." Certain consonants, like the palatal dentals (mediopalatals) d' and t', for example, underwent further development in Polish, becoming, respectively, the completely palatal consonants dź and ć. These can be compared with d' and t' (medio-palatals) in Russian and d and t (dentals) in Serbo-Croatian. Examples are Polish dzieło, Russian dělo and Serbo-Croatian delo "work, task"; and Polish ciało (from older cieło), Russian tělo, and Serbo-Croatian telo "body."

Generally speaking, the palatalization of consonants has gone in Polish beyond the intermediate stage at which it apparently stopped in East Slavic languages like Russian. Thus, before front vowels e and i in Polish the consonants t d s n r became ć dz ś ń rz (the last two resemble the Czech ň and ř). Here are some examples of this specifically Polish development in the area of consonant palatalization as compared with another Slavic language:

Polish ciebie, Russian тебѣ; Polish dzień, Russian дѣнь;

Polish rzeka, Russian рѣка "river"; Polish siebie, Russian себѣ.

While it is true that Polish shares with Czech and Russian the palatalization of n to ń, and with Serbo-Croatian the palatalization of d to dž and t to ć, and (perhaps) with Lusatian the palatalization of s to š and z to ž, none of these languages has developed the phonemic contrasts between c and ć, d and dž and s and š, z and ž, to the extent to which Polish has developed them. A few examples should suffice to illustrate the phonemic quality of palatalization in Polish:

nić "nothing" versus nić "thread"; nos "nose" versus noś "you carry!" (Imperative); zęby "teeth" versus zięby "chaffinches" (a kind of birds).

If we compare contrasting pairs of non-palatal versus palatal consonants in Polish and in Russian, we will come up with the following sets of opposites:

in Polish: c dz s n as opposed to ć dz ś ń

in Russian: t d s n as opposed to t' d' s' n'

Furthermore, there is also the following phonemic opposition in today's Polish: the non-palatal p b f v m ʃ k g ch as opposed to the palatalized p' b' f' v' m' l /or l'/ k' g' ch'.

Phonemically, we have the opposition l:l (the latter is often pronounced as a non-syllabic "double u," as in łapa [ʌpa] "paw"); but phonetically, it is the opposition l̥ (ʃ) /non-palatal/ versus l' (ʃ') (palatalized). As for the consonants p b v m, these were inherited by Polish from Proto-Slavic, in which they were often palatalized in final position by the front "yer" (a semi-vowel that was lost in Old Polish). Traces of this palatalization remain in Polish in the declension of some nouns, just as they often remain in Russian in both the spelling and the declension. This can be seen in the Genitive (possessive case) singular of such nouns, for example, Polish: gołąb/gołębia "pigeon"; Russian: голуб'/голубья; Polish now/nowią "new moon," Russian нов'/нови "unplowed land." Palatalization is also seen quite well in the declension of many Polish place names:

Radom/ genitive singular Radomia

Wrocław/ genitive singular Wrocławia

The spirant f, which did not exist in Proto-Slavic, was regularly replaced by labial plosives (b or p) in the developing Slavic languages, including Polish. Only much later did the f, through Czech influence, gain acceptance into the Polish phonetic system. This is shown quite well in loan words from Latin (at an earlier stage of borrowing) and German (at a later stage of borrowing). Thus we have Latin fērula "scepter," which has produced the Slavic and Polish word berło, and German Farbe, which has produced two Polish words, each one with a different meaning:

barwa "color" (when in Polish the Latin and German f and b were still regularly replaced by b and w), and farba "paint" (when the f sound appeared in Polish).

In the Middle Ages, when Poland was under a strong political and linguistic influence of the Kingdom of Bohemia and Moravia, certain features of Czech and Ruthenian (Ukrainian) usage found their way into the Polish phonetic system. The most important of these was the replacement of the voiced velar g by the voiced velar h (which in Modern Polish is now unvoiced and pronounced identically with the voiceless velar ch). Examples abound:

Polish hardy "haughty, proud" (compare with Russian gordyj)

Polish bohater "hero" (compare with Russian bogatyr)

The picture of consonant changes in Polish, as well as in other Slavic languages, would be incomplete without mentioning the changes which Polish (and Slavic) velars underwent as a result of the first and second palatalization. In the first palatalization, as we know, Proto-Indo-European k g ch before front vowels (especially e and i) became č ž š. The effects of the first palatalization are evident in Old Polish: Polska "Poland" but w Polsce "in Poland"; Boga "of God," but Boże! "oh God!"; Włochy "Italy" but we Włoszech "in Italy." In the second palatalization, Proto-Slavic k g ch before front vowels (especially e and i) changed to c dz s. The effects of the second palatalization are evident in both Middle Polish and Modern Polish: matka "mother," o matce "about mother"; noga "leg" na nodze "on the leg"; Włochy "Italy" but Włosi "Italians."

The velar-plus-palatal-nasal group kn' so common in all Slavic languages, was changed to ks' in Middle Polish through a process known as excessive palatalization (which required a fricative sound like s after a velar). The kn' group remained unchanged in most other Slavic languages. Here are some examples:

Old Polish knięga, Middle Polish księga "book," Czech kniha, Serbo-Croatian knjiga, Russian kniga; Old Polish kniąże, Middle Polish książe "prince," Serbo-Croatian knez, Russian kniaz.

The so-called epenthetic (that is, inserted) i in Polish is also a result of excessive palatalization. Thus, from Old Polish and Middle Polish ocięć (Russian otēc, Serbo-Croatian otac) we have ojciec in Modern Polish. The -i- may also be a secondary consonant in words which otherwise would end in a vowel, as in Middle Polish and Modern Polish wczoraj "yesterday," from Old Polish wczora (Russian včerá). Sometimes, alternate forms which existed in Middle Polish are still found in Modern Polish, for instance, the Middle Polish dziś and dzisiaj "today" (from Old Polish dzisia) and the Middle Polish tu and tutaj (from Old Polish tuta; compare with Russian tut).

Unlike Modern Russian, for example, Modern Polish has reduced certain final sounds in words frequently used. Two good examples are the words nic "nothing" (from Old Polish niczso; compare with Russian ničtō); and już "already" (from Old Polish juże; compare with Russian užē).

In conclusion--on the basis of available linguistic evidence, the following statements can be made with regard to the relationship of Polish to other Slavic languages:

1. Polish belongs to the Western Slavic group of languages, whose main phonetic feature is the fixed stress (on the next-to-the-last syllable in Polish, and on the first syllable in Czech and Slovak). Both the East Slavic and the South Slavic group are characterized by mobile stress.

2. Polish, alone of all the Slavic languages, has preserved the Proto-Slavic nasal vowels a and (to a lesser extent) e, as in mąka "flour," mięso "meat" (compare with Russian muká, miáso).

3. Polish, in a more regular fashion than other Slavic languages, has preserved the Proto-Slavic clusters dl and tl.

4. Polish, unlike Czech, Slovak, Serbo-Croatian, and Slovenian, for example, no longer has any short and long vowels.

5. Both the first and the second palatalization are evident in the changes undergone by the Polish velars k g ch.

6. The palatalization of t d s z n in Polish has gone the full course (as compared, for instance, with Russian, where it has stopped in the intermediate stage).

7. Polish, together with Czech, has been, for many centuries, a vehicle for transmittal of loan words from Latin and German to both Ukrainian and Russian (for example, the Russian words kúxnia "kitchen" and múzyka "music" have been taken from Polish).

8. In comparative Slavic linguistics, Polish should and does occupy an important place, since through a study of its phonology and morphology it is often possible to trace phonological and morphological developments in other Slavic languages, with which Polish shares a common linguistic heritage.